

RPG Reload Glossary: Cloudy with a Chance of Angst, or JRPGs in the Late 1990s

[December 15, 2017](#) by [Shaun Musgrave](#)

Hello, gentle readers, and welcome to the **RPG Reload**, the regular feature where we always bring a party. To be specific, welcome to the **RPG Reload Glossary**, where we sift through the piles of historical debris and messy semantics to try to make some sense of it all. This time around, we're continuing our look at the history of the JRPG sub-genre. In the last part, we followed the progress of the genre through the 16-bit period of console gaming. Enix's *Dragon Quest* series had finally found some competition in Square's *Final Fantasy*, while continued attempts to help the sub-genre break out in the West were largely rebuffed. Meanwhile, as technology moved forward, JRPGs were starting to attempt more sophisticated stories and characters. By the end of the 1990s, all of this conflict would be settled, one way or the other.

To repeat the note from last time: due to the immense size of this particular sub-category, I'm going to be focusing on only the titles that were critical to the development and/or popularization of the genre. This is a necessary move to keep this particular historical retelling from growing to an absurd size.

Thus far, I've mostly focused on video games themselves in this history. But for what's coming next, it's important to talk about one of the more important influences on the JRPG genre from outside of the video game sphere: Japanese comics and animation. A simple glance at the two most popular JRPG franchises shows a clear relation between these two forms of media. *Dragon Quest's* art director was manga artist Akira Toriyama, a man who was already quite popular due to the well-received comic serials *Dr. Slump* and

Dragon Ball. Toriyama's style is quite distinctive, so it's easy to spot his fingerprints on *Dragon Quest* even if you don't know his name all that well.



For its part, *Final Fantasy* was always riffing pretty hard on the works of Hayao Miyazaki and Studio Ghibli. Everything from chocobos to airships to flying mechanical fortresses were almost certainly inspired by films like *Nausicaa* and *Laputa: Castle in the Sky*. It also benefited from a famous artist. Yoshitaka Amano, whose work included such famous efforts as *Gatchaman* and *Vampire Hunter D*, did concept art, character designs, monster designs, and more in his time as lead artist on the *Final Fantasy* series. To be fair to *Final Fantasy*, it was hardly the only game inspired by Studio Ghibli. The influence of Hayao Miyazaki and his studio could be found all throughout Japanese pop media in the 1980s and early 1990s. Indeed, there was a veritable cottage industry built to slake people's thirst for fantasy stories.

As the 1990s went on, however, that thirst appeared to be quenched. As Japan's economy started to rapidly descend from the intoxicating highs of the 1980s bubble, the anime and manga businesses found themselves in need of something big. At the same time, you started to see more artists and writers pursuing more pessimistic stories. What if everything really was going to hell in a handbasket? Post-apocalyptic stories were hardly rare in Japanese media in the 1980s, but Japan's new situation seemed to be provoking more dour, introspective, and deconstructive works. It was only a matter of time before someone found the right combination of ingredients to tap into this rising sentiment, and when it finally happened, it changed Japanese pop culture entirely.



Neon Genesis Evangelion debuted on Japanese television in October of 1995. It is virtually impossible to convey in words the impact it had on Japan. *Evangelion* is, depending on who you ask, either a work of brilliant critique and deconstruction, a hot mess that has a lot of ideas and no clue what to

do with them, or all of that at once. Whatever your personal feelings on the series, there's no denying that it was a major event in Japanese pop culture. It gave the flagging anime industry a king-sized shot in the arm, helped push the popularity of Japanese animation worldwide, and yes, sold a whole lot of merchandise.

Little wonder, then, that we can see its influence starting to show up in video games as we pick up where we left off from mid-1996. Some games would lean harder into that influence than others, with JRPGs practically cannon-balling into Lake *Evangelion*. Plucky young heroes brimming with virtue and optimism were out. Psychologically damaged, brooding pessimists were in. It made sense in a lot of ways. Yesterday's kids were now today's teens adults, and were on the lookout for different things than they had when they were younger. There was still a sizable kids' market in gaming, though, and Nintendo and one of their smaller partners were about to make their own meteoric impact in the JRPG sub-genre by aiming squarely at those kids.

Pokémon Game Boy Commercial (1998)

I've written extensively about *Pokemon* in a previous edition of the **RPG Reload**, so I'm not going to spend too much time covering the same ground here. By making clever use of one of the Game Boy's more underused peripherals, the link cable, it was able to popularize digital collecting like no other game had before. While the franchise wouldn't make its way to the West for a couple more years, when it finally did, it put the final nail in the coffin of JRPGs not being popular outside Japan. In fact, *Pokemon* is the most popular JRPG series in gaming history, and I doubt anyone else will ever reach the peaks it has. Beyond making a giant pile of money and helping spread the gospel of JRPGs, it also took the genre from being one of the more isolated types of games into one of the most social. It did all of that without much of a fancy story to tell or beautiful visuals, too.

Humorously enough, the other piece of the puzzle for helping JRPGs break out worldwide leaned heavily on its fancy story and visuals. Square had taken a big gamble on Sony and their PlayStation. While the system was certainly doing well, there was no guarantee it would be able to stave off Nintendo's new console when it arrived. While SEGA had given Nintendo a good run for their money outside of Japan, the Super NES was nearly as dominant in its home country as Nintendo's original 8-bit console had been. There was really no precedent for beating Nintendo in Japan, and that is amazingly just what Square had gambled their company on happening. Square had completely destroyed their close, priveleged partnership with the biggest name in the business to jump into Sony's car. It would be virtually impossible for them to go back if things didn't turn out well.

For their part, Sony seemed quite aware of what Square had gambled by throwing in with them, and were intent on doing right by the deal. One of the ways this manifested was in Sony agreeing to help localize and publish the upcoming *Final Fantasy 7* in the West. Nintendo of America had always been supportive of Square, but Sony was prepared to market Square's baby like their dinner depended on it. There was little question the game would be a big success in Japan, but Square had been burned enough times to keep

their hopes low for North America and Europe. Luckily, the game itself was well-liked when it launched in Japan. Making the move to the CD format allowed Square to indulge in gorgeous graphics. They packed the game's three discs with stunning pre-rendered CG videos and put together impressive real-time 3D sequences to represent elaborate spells and summons. There had never been such a good-looking JRPG before.

Final Fantasy 7 Commercials from 1997 | TheLifestream.net

That's where Sony focused their marketing efforts when the time came to release the game worldwide later in 1997. The company rolled out a three-month advertising blitz that showed off the game's gorgeous cut-scenes almost entirely without context. This included TV advertisements that didn't tell you much about the game other than that it looked amazing and you had to have it. Many people who bought *Final Fantasy 7* had no idea that they were picking up an RPG. Indeed, many of them likely didn't even know what an RPG was. It was incredibly deceptive campaign, and it completely and utterly succeeded. Not everyone who took home *Final Fantasy 7* was happy

with what they got, but more than enough were to completely shatter Square's expectations. JRPGs were finally big in the West, and Square's baby was the face of them.

The PlayStation defied plenty of expectations itself. Thanks to strong third-party support like Square's, the system was able to easily stave off its competitors. Even mighty Nintendo was forced to eat a slice or two of humble pie, though they fared better than their old rival SEGA. That a great deal of the PlayStation's success had happened on the back of a JRPG was not lost on anyone. The system became the *de facto* home of the genre, which itself had seen a re-energization from *Final Fantasy 7* similar to the one the anime industry got from *Evangelion*. More JRPGs were being released, and more of them were being released in English. Aside from building the market, *Final Fantasy 7* also influenced other developers to adapt its style of heavy story-telling and razzle-dazzle production values. By the time *Final Fantasy 8* hit in 1999, its smash success was assured.

Final Fantasy 7's sales must have stung a little for Nintendo, but I'd like to think it also gave them hope for *Pokemon*'s potential outside of Japan. The publisher had been burnt plenty of times in the past by betting hard on a JRPG, but it finally worked out for them this time. *Pokemon* did amazingly well in every region it launched in, bringing the ancient Game Boy back to life and spawning its own litter of similar titles on handhelds. For a while, it seemed like no title was too risky to try to bring to the West. Namco's *Tales* series, Enix's *Star Ocean*, Konami's *Suikoden*, and Capcom's *Breath of Fire* were but a few of the franchises that found Western success in *Final Fantasy 7*'s wake.

About the only one who *didn't* get the memo was SEGA of America, who did a frankly embarrassingly poor job of capitalizing on the sudden Western popularity of the genre. The man overseeing the SEGA Saturn's twilight years and the preparations for the launch of what would be SEGA's final console, the Dreamcast, had a bizarre chip on his shoulder about the genre.

He left SEGA of America just as the Dreamcast launched, but his tenure at SEGA virtually ensured that almost none of the excellent JRPGs that categorized the Saturn's late life would have a chance of localization. The few that *did* release, such as *Panzer Dragoon Saga* and *Shining the Holy Ark*, were given such small print runs that even the relatively small active Saturn base wasn't covered. The Dreamcast would sing a different tune, but it was too little, too late by then.

In all of this champagne and caviar, though, there's one big name missing. What the heck happened to *Dragon Quest*? The last time we had seen the series was with 1995's *Dragon Quest 6* on the Super Famicom. Around the time of *Final Fantasy 7*'s Japanese release, Enix announced that *Dragon Quest* would be following its rival to Sony's console. Some might have assumed the game was on the horizon at that point, but as the years went by and *Final Fantasy*'s stock rose, *Dragon Quest 7* was nowhere to be found. The game wouldn't release until August of 2000 in Japan, a few months after the launch of the PlayStation 2. That put its Western release into 2001, where it released as a rather humble-looking PlayStation 1 game around the same time that Nintendo and Microsoft were launching the Gamecube and Xbox. While the game sold amazingly well in Japan, I don't think you'll be surprised to hear that it didn't do very well anywhere else.

But here I am, already dipping into the new millennium and the new consoles it brought with it. The next several years would bring a few exciting surprises to the genre, though just as many were tied up in the business side as in the games themselves. We'll take a look at those in next week's **Reload** covering JRPGs in the 2000s, though. Thanks for reading!

Next Week's Reload: *JRPGs in the New Millennium*